

Taking it Seriously

Hiring the right people is key to business success. How can companies identify and attract top talent?

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“ The endurance training part of the selection process lasts for five weeks and is held twice yearly in the Brecon Beacons. Normally starting with 200 candidates, the assessment is focused on the following:

- Personal and combat fitness
- A cross country run against the clock, increasing the distances covered each day, culminating in what is known as the Fan Dance: a 64km march with full equipment scaling and descending Pen y Fan in 20 hours
- By the end of the hill phase, candidates must be able to run four miles in 30 minutes and swim two miles in 90 minutes

This is followed by a jungle phase, taking place in Belize, Brunei, or Malaysia. Here candidates are taught navigation, patrol formation and movement, and are tested for their jungle survival, escape and evasion skills.

Candidates returning to the UK finish training in battle plans and foreign weapons and take part in combat survival exercises. The final selection test is arguably the most gruelling: resistance to interrogation, lasting for 36 hours. From the initial 200 candidates, most will drop out within the first few days, and by the end about 30 will remain. Those who complete all phases of selection are rewarded with a transfer to an operational squadron.

However, the small number who make it through selection are not out of the woods. There is still a post-selection review, and they will now effectively be on probation. As brand new members of the regiment, they will be watched closely as they enter continuation training, and even this far down the line, many soldiers are returned to their original units during this phase.”



Successful people have the innate talent, skills and knowledge that suit the demands of their role

This is a brief overview of the selection process for acceptance into the Special Air Services. My colleague Tony Swift, in his book *Achieving High Performance in Teams within Pharma and Healthcare*, identifies how Harvard College also goes to extraordinary lengths to identify the best students (although clearly assessing for different strengths). Indeed, a common factor amongst all great organisations is the effort, skill and focus that they put into their recruitment processes. They all know that attracting the right people is a defining process in the journey to success.

The assessment process

The assessment element is an important part of any recruitment process. Unfortunately, many organisations attempt to take shortcuts and rely purely on a CV review and a short interview. These companies often pay dearly for this in the longer term. Bad hiring decisions have a material effect on performance and can be extremely costly. Indeed, an American consultant, Bradford Smith, noted that from a study of 54 US companies the average managerial ‘mis-hire’ actually costs a company 24 times the individual’s base salary.

As a result, we at Apodi recently studied the success or otherwise of recruitment activity within Apodi and our client organisations to try to understand what the key drivers of success are. The aim was to develop an assessment process that is comprehensive enough to ensure a significant improvement in the success rate of recruitment activity.

The research

First of all, we systematically reviewed the success or failure of all our recruitment activity within the last 36 months and identified the reasons for it. At the same time we undertook detailed desk research to benchmark our experiences against the recruitment activity of a number of both UK and overseas based organisations.

The research made it clear to us that there appeared to be four main reasons for success or failure. For consistent high performance to follow, we identified that each successful candidate must:

- Have the innate talents suited to the role in question
- Have the skills and knowledge (competencies) to meet the demands of the role

- Fit culturally into the organisation
- Have the mental toughness to succeed, particularly when the pressure is on

The research also showed that even if candidates had three out of the four qualities above, the absence of just one could lead to underperformance and, ultimately, to failure. Furthermore, our research found that the ability of organisations to change individuals through training and development interventions is limited. Innate talents are just that and cultural attitudes and levels of mental toughness can take significant time to change. It is only in the area of skills and knowledge that training and development can make a more immediate impact.

The guiding principles

This research, together with our own experiences, provided the focus for us to develop some guiding principles. These can be summarised as follows:

A person CANNOT be anything they want to be – even if they try hard.

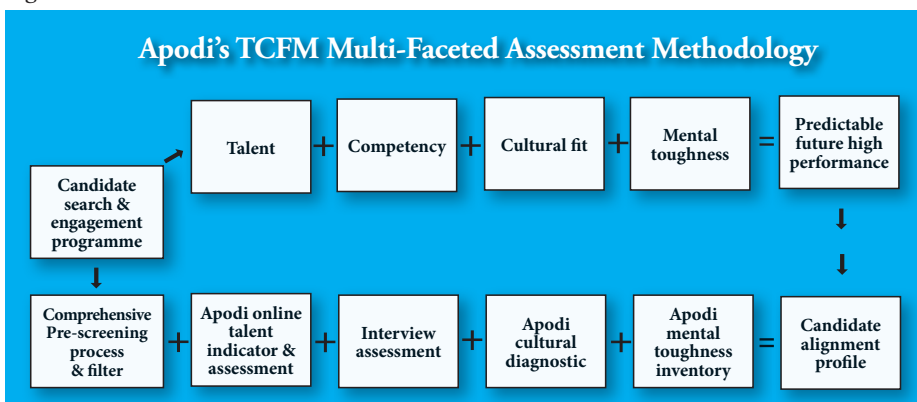
As was noted in the previous article in this series, recruiting for strengths/talents to select individuals whose innate qualities most closely fit the role requirements is key. Effort alone without the appropriate talents for a role is not enough to drive high performance.

Most people think they know what they are good at. However, they are usually wrong.

Asking people what they are good at is simply not enough. It is imperative therefore that systematic testing for talent is vigorously and rigorously undertaken in the assessment process.

Whilst some people are impressive on paper and during the one-on-one interviewing stage, their style, approach and behaviour may simply be inconsistent

Figure 1



with the values and expectations of the organisation.

Even those individuals who may reasonably be expected to perform may not do so in their new environment. Therefore, systematically testing for cultural fit is important in the assessment process.

Whilst talent can be a good indicator of future performance, the world is awash with talented people who never achieve their full potential. This is normally due to a lack of 'mental toughness'.

Without the drive and ability to overcome obstacles, many individuals fail to reach the levels of success that their talent might otherwise indicate. Therefore, the assessment process should include a significant element of testing for mental toughness.

Much can be done to improve the effectiveness of pre-employment assessment. However, the best recruitment processes also include early post-selection review to assess each candidate again, but this time in action in the field.

The practical application of competencies and mental toughness must be investigated and reviewed to ensure that ongoing success is to be achieved.

The methodology

The Apodi methodology is a multi-stage approach which encompasses our experience and findings. This integrated model is detailed below.

Step 1 – Integrated Pre-Employment Assessment (also see Figure 1)

- A candidate search and engagement programme
- A comprehensive pre-screening and filter process
- Interviewing and diagnostic processes focused on:

- Talent
- Competencies (skills and knowledge)
- Cultural fit
- Mental toughness
- Candidate alignment profiling and prediction of future high performance

Step 2 – Post-Employment Assessment

A systematic process is implemented immediately on employment where management reassesses successful candidates in the four key areas of talent, competencies, cultural fit and mental toughness. This is mainly undertaken in the field and can involve specialist coaches where necessary. The role of management is to ensure that the conclusions reached in the pre-employment assessment were correct, that the candidate should be successful in the future and, if so, what training and development can be put in place to accelerate the journey to high performance.

Step 3 – Measurement of the Assessment Process

To help ensure its ongoing success, key measures need to be in place to review the effectiveness of the assessment process. This step in the model will be discussed at greater length in later articles.

Conclusion

A comprehensive and effective assessment process drives just about everything that is good in an organisation – including high performance, employee engagement and quality of life for each and every one involved. Selecting people for the wrong job can lead to untold misery for them, their families and work colleagues. It is for this, and other reasons, that a quality assessment process should be at the top of every management's agenda.



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